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An Arctic Joint Task Force (JTF) as the First Step Towards Security in the Arctic Circle

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ABSTRACT:

With current tensions growing between Russia and other NATO countries, there has been an increased concern over potential security issues in the Arctic, citing Russia's stated intention to bolster their military presence in the region.

Russia maintains many interests in the Arctic Circle including claims to the extension of the underwater sea shelf, a maritime highway for many of its Arctic communities, and the capitalization of natural resources. One of the most concerning issues is the clear discrepancy between Russian and the United States' capabilities in the region. Russia currently has forty icebreakers operating in the Arctic, as well as six functioning Russian military bases.

While Russia has the clear capability to function and thrive in the frigid conditions, the United States is currently lacking the ability to function in the Arctic. In the United States, there

has been a shortage of initiative in funding for the needed resources, ships, aircraft, and unmanned systems for the region. This has left the US with three icebreakers that are well beyond their intended thirty years of service, creating hazards as they run into more malfunctions during their missions.

Maritime law, access to natural resources, and maintaining freedom of navigation in the Arctic Circle are important to the security of the United States and the other nations in the region. In light of the current issues, the United States must look at the Arctic in proactive rather than reactive terms, focusing on long term goals and consequences. The creation of an Arctic Joint Task Force would allow for the U.S. to increase communication, transparency, and intelligence in the region. While the United States has remained quiet on the issue, the creation of a Joint Task Force would not only better the United State's security and functionality in the region, it would also exhibit a commitment to its Arctic allies' interests and security.

Keywords: Arctic Circle, Joint Task Force, United States, Russia

¹ The National Academy of Science Icebreaker Report: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives, One Hundred Ninth Congress, Second Session, September 26, 2006. U.S. G.P.O., 2007, The National Academics of Science, Engineering, Medicine, pg ii. www.nap.edu/read/11753/chapter/13.

Introduction

Over the last decade, the world has started to see the immediate effects of climate change around the globe. This has led to shifts in policies and overall access to certain resources for many nations. One of the unintended consequences of climate change has been the melting of ice caps, and with the melting of these ice caps, the opening of access to new territory in the Arctic

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Circle. New research estimates that 13% of the world's undiscovered oil, 30% of the world's
untapped hydrocarbons gas, and around \$1 trillion in natural resources and precious metals are
² under the steadily melting ice. There are currently 8 countries that
border and have claims in the
Arctic Circle: Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, the United States, Canada, Denmark, and
³
Iceland. Similarly, while China does not lay a specific claim to an area in the Arctic Circle, their
increased interest in the region, paired with their increased investment in polar technology has
drawn concern from the United States and the other allied nations on the future monopolization
of the Arctic.⁴

The growing importance of the Arctic means the question no longer centers around *if* the
Department of Defense should address this issue, but rather *how* it should address the need
for a clear front in the Arctic Circle. In light of the growing debates, the United States must enter
this new decade with a clear purpose and initiative in the Arctic. Therefore, this paper will argue
that the first step for the Department of Defense is to invest in the creation of a new Arctic-Joint
Task

² Anderson, Nathan, et al. "Key Issues: U.S. Arctic Interests." U.S. Government Accountability Office (U.S. GAO),
2018, www.gao.gov/key_issues/us_arctic_interests/issue_summary.

The National Academy of Science Icebreaker Report: Hearing before the Subcommittee on
Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of
Representatives, One Hundred Ninth Congress, Second Session, September 26, 2006. U.S. G.P.O., 2007, The
National Academics of Science, Engineering, Medicine, pg 2. www.nap.edu/read/11753/chapter/13.; Cross, Tyler.

"Divining Russia's Intentions in the Arctic." The Maritime Executive, 2019, [https://www.maritime-
executive.com/editorials/divining-russia-s-intentions-in-the-arctic](https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/divining-russia-s-intentions-in-the-arctic)

"Full Text: China's Arctic Policy." Xinhua, pg 2. www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/26/c_136926498_2.htm.

Force to maintain transparency, counterbalance the growing presence of Russia and China, and
to promote allied cooperation in the Arctic region.

Background

As the ice caps continue to recede and new topography is exposed, a unique security challenge has presented itself in access to trade and resources, and maintaining stability in the region. In the status quo, there are current tensions between Russia and other NATO countries, with no indication that these tensions will die down soon. There has been an increased concern over potential security issues in the Arctic, citing Russia's stated intention to bolster their

⁵ military presence in the region.

Russia maintains many interests in the Arctic Circle including claims to the extension of the underwater sea shelf, a maritime highway for many of its Arctic communities, and to capitalize on natural resources. One of the most concerning issues is the clear discrepancy between Russia's and the United States' capabilities in the region. Russia currently has 40 icebreakers operating in the Arctic, as well as 6 functioning Russian military bases. As they build their icebreaker classes they are also working to equip their Arctic bases with S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems, new infantry arctic warfare kits, and updated

⁶ snowmobiles to navigate the region.

More recently, on March 5th, 2020, President of Russia, Valdimir Putin, enacted an executive order that focused on Russian policy in the Arctic through 2035. The aim of this order

⁵ The National Academy of Science Icebreaker Report: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives, One Hundred Ninth Congress, Second Session, September 26, 2006. U.S. G.P.O., 2007, The National Academics of Science, Engineering, Medicine, pg ii. www.nap.edu/read/11753/chapter/13.

⁶ Episkopos, Mark. "How Russia Is Getting Ready for War in the Arctic." The National Interest, The Center for the

National Interest, 1 Dec. 2018, www.nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/how-russia-getting-ready-war-arctic-3766 is to increase the population out north and to accelerate the economic development in the region. In this order, citizens are encouraged to move out north to the remote regions in the Arctic Circle, promising payouts and increased economic infrastructure development. To increase these developments, Russia has started to invest in and develop large energy projects in the region, with the goal of creating a large amount of jobs in the region. One of Russia's largest goals in the region is to start exporting large amounts of oil out and through the region, which would require the infrastructure in the Arctic Circle to do so. While this order stated an interest in maintaining stability in the region, there is a clear discrepancy between their military and economic movements and their stated intentions.

While Russia has the capability to thrive in the frigid conditions, the United States lacks the ability to function in the Arctic at all. Currently, the United States has recognized the Arctic Circle as an area of strategic interest, but there has been a lack of initiative in funding for the needed resources, ships, aircraft, and unmanned systems for the region. The U.S. currently has 3 icebreakers: the *Polar Star*, the *Polar Sea*, and the *Healy*. The *Polar Sea* was retired in 2010, while the *Polar Star* is still in use but well beyond its intended 30 years of service, leading to

⁷ more hazards as it continues to run into more malfunctions during its missions. The medium sized icebreaker called the *Healy* does not have the capability to run independent missions in the Arctic Circle and only provides support to the *Polar Star's* mission.⁸ This gap in resources has

⁷ The United States Congressional Research Service. (2019). *Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress*, pg 48. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41153.pdf>

The United States Congressional Research Service. (2019). *Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress*, pg 47. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41153.pdf>. ; The National Academy of Science Icebreaker Report: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives, One Hundred Ninth Congress, Second Session, September 26, 2006. U.S. G.P.O., 2007, The National Academics of Science, Engineering, Medicine, pg 80. www.nap.edu/read/11753/chapter/13

left the United States lacking and in need of a change in light of the inevitable growing importance of the Arctic. Thus the United States Department of Defense should create an Arctic Joint Task Force to counterbalance Russia's growing presence in the region and to provide the needed transparency in the region to avoid an arms race..

Creating an Arctic Joint Task Force

As national interests start to become intertwined in the region, the questions about who has access to which sections, resources, fisheries, trade routes, etc, will become ever more important. As these questions loom in the horizon, now is the time to act to create the conversations that will set the norms, laws, and regulations in the region. Similarly, the United States must weigh its long term interests in the region, taking into account Russia and China as rising powers. The Arctic is one of the least understood and mapped oceans, meaning there are many areas for future research, discovery and trade routes. As many nations move into the melting tundra, the creation of an Arctic Joint Task Force (A-JTF) is key to maintaining the United States interests in the region among competing claims.

Currently, the United States lacks a clear plan or initiative for how the United States wants to engage in the region, and what it views as its core interests. The creation of an A-JTF would be the first step in getting all of the many agencies working together to create a clear step forward in the region and align interests and national initiatives.¹⁰ Many current international conversations on the Arctic region are focused on concerns of keeping open communication in

⁹ Cross, Tyler. "Divining Russia's Intentions in the Arctic." *The Maritime Executive*, 2019, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/divining-russia-s-intentions-in-the-arctic>

¹⁰ Berbrick, Walter. 2018. "10 Big Ideas to 'Up America's Game in the Arctic.'" *National Interest*. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/10-big-ideas-%E2%80%98-america%E2%80%99s-game-arctic%E2%80%99-31622>

the Arctic to avoid escalation or other potential issues.¹¹ These conversations are paired with the clear observation that Russia and China are making their presence known in the region and that must be taken into account. Now is a time for creating clarity; the creation of an A-JTF would display a clearer picture of where the United States stands in the region.

In light of the current inability for the United States to maintain a presence in the region, the conversation has also shifted towards multilateral agreements and military exercises. In late 2018, in conjunction with all 29 NATO countries as well as Finland and Sweden, the United States participated in Trident Juncture '18.¹² This exercise was one of the largest NATO exercises since the Cold War and left a large effect on the international community. Many saw it as a first step towards pushing back against Russia in the region. Creating an A-JTF would allow for more open communication between these allies, and thus the ability to coordinate on future military agreements and exercises.

While many nations want to maintain stability in the region, it is important to figure out how the United States should and would be able to operate in the region if need be. Currently, Joint Special Operations Task Force Alaska, runs Arctic Edge 2018, which allows for personnel to train in Alaska under frigid conditions. One of the biggest challenges for the teams is to develop new equipment for the teams to function in severe environments.¹³ Research and development has always been a function of the U.S. Federal Government, and now, more R&D

¹¹ This was based off listening to a session at the Riga Conference in Latvia where the panelists discussed what they perceived as important in the future to the Arctic region. The meeting was held under Chatham House rules though and therefore I will not list the speakers.

¹² Thompson-Jones, Mary. "NATO's Arctic Exercise Is a Good Start to Standing Up to Russian Militarization of the High North." *The National Interest*, The Center for the National Interest, 6 Nov. 2018, www.nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/natos-arctic-exercise-good-start-standing-russian-militarization-high-north-35367

¹³ Miller, Kiona. 2018. "Special Operations Forces Exercise in Arctic Conditions." *U.S. Department of Defense*. <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1468225/special-operations-forces-exercise-in-arctic-conditions/>

needs to focus on Arctic capabilities. An A-JTF would create an avenue for requests for funding, deeper development for research, and the sharing of research and resources with allies in the region.

The Evidence

In early 2019, reports showed that Russia was not keeping up with the funding required to maintain its presence in the Arctic region. The Kremlin was relying on state-owned gas and oil enterprises to invest in the development of Arctic assets, yet many of these enterprises remained hesitant to invest. While Russia had attempted to ease the financial burden for creating an Arctic infrastructure, they had only earmarked \$14 billion of the \$200 billion they had predicted to need.¹ Yet, with Putin's most recent executive order, in March 2020, focused on Russian policy in the Arctic through 2035, it is clear that Russia is not faltering in their initiative towards the Arctic. Rather, despite the odds, they continue to bolster their presence and push forward with future initiatives in the region. This order has now increased state as well as private investment in the region, with the goal of creating a more stable infrastructure to continue to grow outwards

¹ Tack, Sim. Nov. 6, 2019. "Russia's Arctic Dreams Remain on Ice." *Stratfor*. Accessed Nov. 11, 2019. https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russia-arctic-development-still-ice-oil-gas-lng-shipping-rosneft-gazprom?fbclid=IwAR3ccP9MYj_y0E1y5bwMtd_XSws8fnJzHEhx6EerNOUyMtl9qaiWytFv20A#/home/error

from their shores.² With increased traction in the Northern Sea Route the demand for the United States to take action is continuing to grow as the need to counterbalance future economic and military initiatives in the region becomes more apparent.

The importance of trading routes and growing development in the Arctic are becoming more important in light of discussions of faster trade routes for China to Europe. When looking at the Northern Sea Route, traffic has grown by 350% over the last 6 years.³ Many building projects are bringing in more interest and engagement in the region. Yet, the prediction is that with this growing interest, and with the potential for a future stable flow of maritime traffic through the area, this may lead to the stabilization that Russia is looking for in its sectors. Therefore, while Russia may be struggling financially at the moment, this may not be the story for long. One of the keys to the increase of maritime traffic though, is China's future trade policies in the region.

China continues to become a growing concern as they push up against the United States economy. New trade routes may play a crucial role in influencing future economies and global trade, creating long term impacts for the interests and security of the United States. These concerns only continue to heighten as China continues to bolster their abilities in Antarctica, while preparing for a transition to become a great power in the Arctic.⁴ As China's interests grow in the region, so does their relationship with Russia. Historically, these powers have had relations

² "Putin signs policy order encouraging Arctic population." *PressTV*. 2020.

<https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2020/03/06/620243/Russia-arctic-economy-security>

³ Tack, Sim. Nov. 6, 2019. "Russia's Arctic Dreams Remain on Ice." *Stratfor*. Accessed Nov. 11, 2019.

https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russia-arctic-development-still-ice-oil-gas-lng-shipping-rosneft-gazprom?fbclid=IwAR3ccP9MYj_y0E1y5bwMtd_XSws8fnJzHEhx6EerNOUyMtl9qaiWytFv20A#/home/error

⁴ *The Economist*. 2019. "The voyage of two icebreakers have been creating headlines in China." *The Economist*.

<https://www.economist.com/china/2019/11/28/the-voyage-of-two-icebreakers-have-been-creating-headlines-in-china>

An Arctic Joint Task Force 9 together, but as they work together to develop Arctic energy resources, the looming debate on resources and reliance on Russian energy becomes larger.⁵ Allowing these powers to set up shop in the United States backyard must be addressed for future security interests of the United States. This becomes an issue not only for the United States but also for its allies. As China continues to grow as an economic power, and as more nations become reliant on Russian energy, the idea of a monopolized Arctic in Russia and China's favor becomes a more eerie prospect.

Alternative Arguments

Many arguments around this issue are focused on how the United States should engage in the region. There has been a push to directly fund the Polar Security Cutter Program, a budget ¹⁹plan to start funding three new heavy icebreakers and three new medium polar icebreakers. Similarly, there are also alternative initiatives to create new headquarters in Greenland, create an Arctic Development Bank, and overall develop new research on different technologies that would help the United States function in the frigid region.²⁰ While these direct approaches are useful, they must be taken in stride and paired with the initiatives and concerns of many of the other nations in the region.

When looking at ice breaker programs, building up seems like the right first step, yet one must analyze what the appropriation of appropriate resources towards this endeavor would look like. The estimated cost to fully fund these ships currently is estimated at around \$2.1 billion. Yet there have been continued concerns about maintaining funding for repairs, new research, etc.

⁵ Gasper, Donald. 2018. "China and Russia want to develop Arctic energy resources together, and US disapproval may not deter them." *South China Morning Post*.

<https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/asia/article/2163719/china-and-russia-want-develop-arctic-energyresources>

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A hard commitment to the Arctic would require a hard commitment in long term funding towards new research on plans and the continued maintenance for these ships. Even if the United States was to immediately fund an icebreaker program these new ships wouldn't be out in water

¹⁹ The United States Congressional Research Service. (2019). *Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress*, pg 48. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41153.pdf>

²⁰ Berbrick, Walter. 2018. "10 Big Ideas to 'Up America's Game in the Arctic.'" National Interest. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/10-big-ideas-%E2%80%98-america%E2%80%99s-game-arctic%E2%80%99-31622>

²¹ The United States Congressional Research Service. (2019). *Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress*, pg 48. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41153.pdf>

²² until 2023. While determining if the United States should invest in a new icebreaker program is relevant under the time crunch the U.S. is under, the flow of funding for this program will seemingly never exist absent an organization that supports and continues to research the icebreakers importance to U.S. national security and interests in the region.

The creation of an A-JTF is not mutually exclusive of funding new programs but would, rather, allow for new and updated research to guide funding and proper initiatives. There is growing research on how the U.S. should start to engage in the Arctic, and the blaring reality is that there are many alternative answers. Yet, there is no guiding organization or agency deciding on what the right choice is for the United States. An A-JTF would allow for interagency cooperation that would streamline these conversations and allow for the sharing of resources and cooperation on these issues. This would not only resolve any inter agency issues, but would allow for the much needed transparency on any issues that may arise. These conversations are becoming more important as the issue of counterbalancing Russia and pushing back against China's growing economy become more relevant and require an efficient response.

Of more importance, is the role that an A-JTF plays in the creation of inroads to international tasks forces, military exercises, shared research, and more. As the United States navigates many changing initiatives, an A-JTF would maintain the United States vital interest to security and national interest in the region. Conversations are starting to point at creating an international task force to start creating rules, norms, and initiatives in the region. The creation of an A-JTF would allow for the United States to not only seriously take part in these discussions, but also allow for the preservation of U.S. interests in these conversations.

²² Shankman, Sabrina. 2018. "The U.S. urgently needs new icebreaker ships to patrol the Arctic. Will Trump's border wall get in the way?" Inside Climate News/NBC. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/u-s-urgently-needs-new-icebreaker-ships-patrol-arctic-will-n942236>.

Similarly, the Arctic is unique in that it requires the combined efforts of the United States' allies to counterbalance the monopolization of resources and rising powers in the region. The United States has historically played a hegemonic role of power in many regions, yet the Arctic is one area in which clear discrepancies in power dynamics require the use of the allies and their resources to work together to counterbalance and maintain stability in the region. As homeland discussions of how engaged the United States should remain in the global sphere, the Arctic can be a starting point for relying on and pushing allies to become more engaged with the growing powers. Many of the United States' allies hold the resources to start engaging and counterbalancing, it is now a question of coordinating these efforts, and now is the time to act to come together on these issues.

Conclusion

Overall, the Arctic has started to become more relevant in discussions of homeland security and counterbalancing Russia. Russia has continued to bolster their presence in the

Arctic, and with rising tensions between the United States and Russia, a clear front against these rising issues is needed. The discussion of China has also started to become a concern, as questions of trade routes and monopolization of resources and routes become a growing issue in conversations. The access to resources and maintenance of freedom of navigation in the region remain important issues to address. These discussions on China paired with the concern of Russian energy dependence, continues to push the issue of the Arctic to the top of international issues. How the United States acts now will set the stage for future capabilities to interact and influence research, trade, and policies in the Arctic region.

While there are debates on the urgency of the issue, and how the United States should engage, the best first step for the United States is to create an Arctic-Joint Task Force. Research on the Arctic continues to pick up as research starts to offer ideas on how to engage and expand in the region. While many of these conversations are important, there is no clear cohesion between departments or researchers themselves that guides anyone in knowing what the U.S. next step is in the Arctic. An A-JTF would allow for cooperation between agencies, and would open doors for the required inroads for international cooperation in the area. There is a rising sense of urgency to engage in the Arctic and to present a solid front moving forward. An A-JTF would allow for the needed cohesion and understanding.

Similarly, the importance of transparency and avoidance of escalation in the region, remain important not only to the U.S. but also to its allies. A JTF will create transparency and cohesion in the homeland and also increase transparency on the United States' interests in the region. All of these reasons and more, provide clear evidence as to why an Arctic- Joint Task Force would be the best option moving forward for the United States in the Arctic Circle.

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